

# British Society of Criminology

**The British Criminology Conferences: Selected Proceedings. Volume 1: Emerging Themes in Criminology.** Papers from the British Criminology Conference, Loughborough University, 18-21 July 1995. This volume published September 1998. Editors: Jon Vagg and Tim Newburn. ISSN 1464-4088. See end of file for copyright and other information.

## **POLICE INVESTIGATIONS INTO RESIDENTIAL BURGLARY**

**Tim Coupe and Max Griffiths**

Residential burglary can be regarded as one of the most important crimes, since as well as being one of the most common forms of criminal behaviour, it also intrudes into the home and damages feelings of personal security, peace of mind and well-being.<sup>[1]</sup> Because of this, it often has an impact on its victims, and others who fear burglary, that is out of all proportion to the value of the property that is stolen (Maguire 1982). It is, therefore, important that residential burglary detection rates should be improved, since as well as reducing the numbers of existing offenders at large, it should also serve to deter others contemplating burglary (Burrows and Tarling 1987). Fewer burglaries should also ease public anxiety, and moderate home insurance costs, which have risen sharply during the last decade.

Residential burglary levels reflect, in part, the risk of being caught and the ease of committing this type of crime compared with other crimes. More effective policing and enhanced situational prevention may deter the burglar (Clarke 1992, Forrester et al. 1988), though the latter may cause displacement to other targets and other offences (Gabor 1990). Similarly, the punishments meted out to offenders will prevent the offending of those given custodial sentences, and may, generally, prevent some offenders committing further crimes (Nee and Taylor 1988). The resourcing of the police has a bearing on their effectiveness, but this also depends on how they are organised to combat the burglar, the emphasis placed on various investigative activities, and the way in which they are implemented (Chatterton 1987). The study is principally concerned with evaluating the effectiveness of police activities and operations and, where appropriate, recommending changes that would enhance detection rates and which would maintain, if not improve, the victims' regard for the force.

### **Survey area**

Research was conducted into burglaries committed in two divisions of the West Midlands Police Force between March and September 1994. At that time the area was covered by nine police sub-divisions, in which a variety of investigative procedures and practices were used. It has a population of 750,000, spread over an area of 21,000 hectares in 290,000 households, and is policed by 1,200 officers. The area is a major part of a large UK city and provides a variety of residential environments from inner-city urban to rural-urban fringe. It includes areas susceptible to different types of burglary, with different types of victim, populations with varying criminal dispositions, and offering different degrees of cover, opportunity and ease of access for the burglar.

## Research method

Surveys of police officers, a victim survey, and an 'intervisibility' survey of the incident site were conducted on a single sample of burglaries, so that the various aspects of the crimes and their investigation could be related on the basis of individual incidents. The 'intervisibility survey' involved assessing how visible burgled dwellings were from others nearby, and took account of the built environment and vegetation. The visibility of the burglary site can have a bearing on whether or not burglaries were spotted while in progress, as well as the ease with which the burglar can get away unseen. Complemented by police records, the relationships between burglar and burglary were also considered where the burglar's details were known. Enumeration district level census data were used to build profiles of the residential areas where the sample crimes were committed, and the areas where criminals live. The study excluded attempted burglaries since their characteristics are significantly different from burglaries in terms of reporting, available evidence and police investigation.

There were 5,768 residential burglaries committed during the survey period. A sample of 704 of them were selected for the study of police operations, including all 256 primary detected cases and a random sample of 448 of the undetected cases.<sup>[2]</sup> In fact, by December 1994 the number of primary detections had risen to 340 due to longer investigations proving fruitful and, more significantly, because of delays in the testing of forensic evidence and recording details onto the police computer.

The surveys covered every burglary that was committed and involved the majority of officers across the study area. Police officers completed 'mailed' questionnaires at the three main stages of the investigations. The purpose of these was to:

- detail the initial investigations by the first officer to attend the burglary (Stage 1);
- cover the subsequent visit to the crime scene by a CID officer, for the subset of investigations where this occurred (Stage 2);
- provide information on the methods used to investigate every primary, detected case, and 8 per cent of the cases that underwent further CID investigation, but remained undetected (Stage 3).

Once the outcome of the police investigations was known, the victims of the sampled burglaries were contacted and, if willing, interviewed. They provided information on the perceived effectiveness of the police response and actions, and the effects of the burglary on the household. An 'intervisibility' survey was simultaneously conducted on the residential environment in order to obtain measures of site vulnerability, visibility and accessibility.

Few of the residential burglaries considered in the study had been solved as a result of 'primary' investigation by the start of 1995; only 5.8 per cent were recorded as detected. The bulk remained and will remain unsolved. Although a further 25-30 per cent will probably be cleared up as secondary detections by summer 1995, it is almost certain, that at least 65 per cent of these crimes will never be solved and that many of the criminals responsible for them will never be brought to justice.<sup>[3]</sup> The record for the recovery of stolen property is worse; victims are unlikely to see their property again if the offender manages to leave the scene of the crime without being caught. Although these figures may look initially rather poor, the police do well to achieve these levels of performance in view of the scarcity of evidence. Despite this, the figures suggest that there may be scope to improve primary detection rates.

The principal purposes here are to identify the key aspects in the investigation process, assess how effectively officers use evidence and information, how well the CID screening process identifies the burglaries worth investigation, and to assess the effectiveness of police operations and activities.

## The burglary investigation process

The authorities respond to burglary of a dwelling in terms of five principal activities:

- the initial despatch of a police unit in response to the burglary alert, normally from the victim, and investigation at the scene. In general one or two officers were despatched, taking, on average, 30 minutes to arrive and spending 30 minutes at the scene;
- visits by Scenes of Crime Officers (SOCO), on average taking 20 minutes, who carry out forensic assessment at the bulk of burglary sites;
- case screening by the CID;
- visits by CID officers to the burglary sites;
- other CID activities, including surveillance, targeting known offenders, tracing stolen property, following up evidence provided by initial investigations and arresting and interviewing suspects.

**Table 1: Origin of evidence**

Origin	% of total evidence(*)
Burglary scene	71
Other offences	4
Police intelligence	12
Police operations	3
Suspect interview	10

\*All the different items of evidence used by detectives in their investigations

## The use of evidence

The attention a burglary receives will depend on the available evidence, the detective's workload and experience, and the sub-division's prioritisation of burglary in respect to the other crimes occupying the CID office. Therefore, although not formalised, crime screening was occurring and policies varied between the sub-divisions.

The majority of burglaries (72 per cent) provided little or no initial evidence. The time spent on these cases should be minimised as they have a low detection rate (1.2 per cent) and most of the detections arise from evidence that would have been found even if the burglary had been filed after an initial visit. The burglary scene proved to be the richest source of evidence (Figure 1), mainly coming from witnesses rather than the burglary site (about 80 per cent of evidence from the burglary scene came from witnesses). It provided over 70 per cent of the information used in burglary investigations.

The process of screening burglaries was carried out quite effectively. Nevertheless, there were grounds for adjusting the basis for selecting cases for investigation. There was some scope both to investigate additional cases where there was a reasonable chance of a successful detection, and to exclude certain less promising cases from investigation, in order to save police resources. This could provide an extra 33 detections, an increase of 0.6 per cent in the detection rate, assuming a similar degree of success using evidence of comparable quality.

## The effectiveness of police operations

The principal methods and operations for solving burglaries are shown in Table 2. The majority of burglaries were solved by catching the offender at or near the scene or as a result of information from witnesses at the scene. This is illustrated by 80 per cent of the detected burglaries being solved within 10 days.

**Table 2: Principal methods and operations used to detect burglaries**

Detection method	% of detections	Number
Offender caught at or near the scene	43	90
Questioning witnesses (victims and neighbours) at the scene	34	70
Collection of forensic evidence essential in detection	6	13
Subsequent CID investigation, based on information from local contacts (1%) and informants (4%)	5	11
Subsequent investigation (generally CID) involving surveillance (4%) and/or stop-checks (1%)	5	11
Arrested for another offence	3	7
Additional information discovered by the victim	3	6
Miscellaneous	1	1
<b>Total detections at 30.9.94 (excl. non-response)</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>209</b>

## Catching the offender in the act

43 per cent of all the primary detections resulted from the offender being caught at or near the crime scene. However, the incidents where offenders were successfully caught in the act represent a minority, only 10 per cent, of the burglaries reported 'in progress'.<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore, there appears to be potential to significantly enhance primary detections by catching more burglars at 'in progress' incidents since 90 per cent of the burglars observed at incidents got clean away, and only 3 per cent of these were subsequently detected by other means. This potential concerns an additional 10 per cent of all the burglaries that took place.

The police response time and the number of officers attending are crucial for the successful capture of a burglar reported in or near a dwelling. If the police responding to 'in progress' alerts could arrive at the scene within five minutes or less of receiving the call from the control room, and with three or more officers attending, the detection rate for burglaries reported in progress should be of the order of 25 per cent, increasing total primary detections by 1 to 2 per cent. This could raise the overall clearance rate to about 50 per cent, confirming that the adoption of 'ideal practice' could increase detection rates (Chatterton 1987).

Other factors affected a successful response to burglaries reported 'in progress'. The likelihood of a burglary being reported 'in progress' depended on the socio-demographic profile and environmental morphology of the neighbourhood. Fewer burglaries were reported 'in progress' in the most deprived enumeration districts, possibly because fewer dwellings had telephones. The inhabitants of these areas may also exhibit a reduced willingness to contact the police because of either intimidation or higher levels of criminal activity within the total population. However, once the burglary had been reported the offender was more likely to be

caught in these areas possibly because of the lighter vegetation cover around houses in these areas which made the offender easier for the police to see.

'In progress' detection rates were poorest in the sub-divisions where officers had a large area to cover and this was reflected in these sub-divisions having poor response times. Detection rates were also poor in sub-divisions where the number of burglaries per officer was particularly high and, generally, at times of the day when demands on police resources were greatest. In order to provide an appropriate response at these crucial times, and in the sub-divisions which were less successful at catching burglars red-handed, resources may need to be adjusted or focused on particularly susceptible areas of the sub-division. Improved police cover may be facilitated by the use of additional single-manned patrol units.

## **Questioning the victim**

Some 94 per cent of burglary victims were questioned by the first officer(s) attending, and 18 per cent provided some useful information. Victims provided evidence that was the key factor in solving the crime in under 1 per cent of the cases (4 per cent of cases where they provided some evidence). However, this accounted for 19 per cent of all primary detections. On average, officers spent 26 minutes at the burglarised dwelling, talking to the victim and assessing the burglary site. This represented 58 hours of effort per detected burglary, excluding travel time to and from the scene.

Police visits to the scene have an important bearing on how victims view the service provided by the police. Victims' satisfaction was dependent on a reasonably quick arrival to standard response burglaries. It also depended, more importantly, upon the officers spending sufficient time with the victim. Spending at least 20 minutes, and preferably 30 minutes, with victims would improve their regard for the service provided.

Since visits to the dwelling have an important influence on victim satisfaction as well as providing the witness evidence from the victim that will be critical for the success of a fifth of the burglary cases that are solved, this time can be regarded as a reasonable use of police resources. The initial visit to the dwelling, in addition, provides the opportunity to question neighbours, whose vigilance can supply the officers with good suspect or vehicle details that result in the subsequent solution of the case. It should be noted that approximately 15 per cent of the detections from witnesses' evidence are 'in progress' burglaries where the offender was not apprehended at or near the scene, and about 4 per cent of these may be solved if the above recommendations concerning the response to burglary alerts are implemented. Therefore, the benefits of questioning victims may be somewhat offset by greater success in catching offenders at the burglary scene.

## **Questioning the victims' neighbours**

The first officer(s) attending the burglary questioned the victims' neighbours in 52 per cent of burglaries. An average of two households were questioned. Although this had no effect on the victim's regard for the police, 22 per cent of the cases where neighbours were contacted provided useful information, and 5 per cent led to a detection. Information from neighbours was the main factor in the detection of 14 per cent of the burglaries that were solved.

Although the success rate of interviewing neighbours is low, it is comparatively cost-effective, since it does not normally involve a special journey to the crime scene. Only a little additional time is needed to question neighbours, an average of 8 minutes per case, where a single officer patrol attends the scene, and no extra time for multiple officer patrols. In general, no extra travel time was incurred. Since 45 per cent of the units responding to burglaries where neighbours were questioned were single-manned, interviewing neighbours is very cost-effective with an average of 6.2 hours per primary detection.

Since police visits were made to 94 per cent of victims, there may be a potential to boost detections at little cost, by questioning neighbours in the cases where questioning did not occur, particularly where the circumstances of the burglary match those where responses have previously proved most useful. Neither the numbers of officers attending the burglary scene, nor the shortening of investigations to attend other incidents, affected whether or not neighbours were questioned or the amount of useful information obtained from them. Although single officer patrols tended to question fewer neighbouring households at each

incident they dealt with than multiple officer units (M-W,  $p < 0.05$ ), this had no effect on the amount or quality of information collected.

It would not be helpful, for reasons of practicality and public relations, to have interviewed neighbours who were not questioned between midnight and six a.m., because they were likely to be asleep. However, if it is assumed that half the people who were not questioned at other times were available for questioning (victim estimates put this figure at 42 per cent), then an additional 11 detections might result if they were contacted. While this would be a modest gain, in view of the small additional effort required, it is, nevertheless, sensible for officers to question neighbours wherever possible.

## Visits by scenes of crime officers

Although scenes of crime officers (SOCOs) made visits to about 90 per cent of all the burglaries that were committed, forensic evidence was found and tested in only 9 per cent.<sup>[5]</sup> This evidence played a part, often as supporting evidence, in 21 per cent of the cases that were solved. However, it led to the primary detection of 12 cases, a 0.2 per cent detection rate. Since SOCOs spent an average of 20 minutes at each burglary, and this represents 144 hours per detection. The collection of forensic evidence is, therefore, costly and time consuming.

Although forensic evidence plays a significant role in investigation and detection, it is found in only a small number of burglaries that are visited. If the means could be found to reduce the number of burglary sites visited, while maintaining the amount of forensic evidence obtained, it would save resources as well as help to eliminate the delays in forensic testing, currently up to three months. This would lead to the earlier detention of offenders, and to the prevention of the extra burglaries they might commit.

There is no evidence to show that the elimination of many SOCO visits would lower the victim's regard for the service provided by the police.<sup>[6]</sup> Indeed, it actually damaged this regard in the 5 per cent of cases where victims regarded the SOCOs' visits as too short or their manner unsatisfactory.

All available crime scene information has been tested, but, other than for aggravated burglaries and 'caught in the act' cases, no reliable predictor of useful forensic evidence has been found. Further work is needed to enable the police to identify the burglary incidents that would benefit from a forensic visit.

## CID visits to the scene

CID officers visited the scene of 36 per cent of all burglaries and collected useful information from witnesses in 16 per cent (or 6 per cent of all burglaries). However, in all but 2.4 per cent of these, the information obtained did not improve on that collected by the first officer at the scene (Wilcoxon,  $p = 0.53$ ), though when there was new information, it always resulted in a detection. The bulk of the visits to the scene made by the CID appear to be duplicated effort.

On average, one or two detectives visited the burglary sites two weeks after the incident, and spent 22 minutes there. Excluding access time, which, given the fact that the visits were generally not by telephone appointment, is likely to be greater per visit than for the response to the initial burglary alert, 1,050 man hours were used to obtain eight detections. This does not appear to be cost-effective.

Though the CID visit evoked a negative reaction from a minority of victims (6 per cent of those visited) who thought the visit was too brief, in general, CID visits had little or no effect on the victim's perception of the service offered by the police (M-W,  $p = 0.58$ ).

Since CID visits had little impact on either detection rates or victim satisfaction, it would seem that savings could be made by reducing the number of visits to the scene. It would, however, be desirable to achieve this while retaining the subset where new information was collected and resulted in a successful outcome. Since five of these eight detections arose from victims' own additional investigations, it would seem that, at most, only three detections (1.5 per cent of all detections) would be lost by reducing the number of CID visits to the scene. Additional savings might also result if these visits could be made by appointment, where appropriate, or, where the victim does not have a phone, if visits are made at a time when victims are likely to be at home, such as Sunday morning.

## Further CID activities

Further CID work was generally cost-effective, leading to a tenth of all detections. Though not much used, when they were, informants, local contacts, stop-checks and surveillance provided a good chance of solving burglaries. Despite being a means in a quarter cases of linking the offender, directly or indirectly, to the incident, stolen property was rarely used as the key factor in detecting a case, a fact that may reflect the prevalence of informal means of disposal as well as the logistical problems associated with its use in burglary investigation.

## Conclusions

Few residential burglary cases were solved by primary investigation, and little of the property stolen was recovered. This is principally because, in over two thirds of the incidents, there was little or no evidence available to justify an investigation, while in certain sub-divisions and at certain times, it is likely that available manpower and its deployment also played a part. In view of these circumstances, the police handled burglary cases quite effectively.

Nevertheless, there is scope to improve the detection rate, make manpower savings, and further improve the victim's regard for the service provided by the police. These can be realised largely by using more widely the best practices and procedures currently being employed. This would involve changing the emphasis between certain police activities and adjusting the way some activities are carried out. It would also entail switching expenditure from the least cost-effective operations to those which offer scope to economically boost detection rates. It is likely that this reallocation of resources would improve primary detection rates by as much as 40 per cent, with a final clear-up rate approaching 50 per cent.

The most significant change would be to improve the police reaction to burglaries reported while in progress, mainly with faster, better manned responses. Although almost half the detections came from offenders being caught at or near the crime scene, there is still significant potential to increase the number of burglaries solved in this way, and reduce the amount of property that is lost. As things stand, other than through secondary detection or, in some cases, more effective proactive policing, catching the burglar at or near the crime scene is the only way many burglaries could be detected. The other changes would be to interview more neighbours at the scene, improve the way crimes are screened for investigation, and selectively expand the CID's 'further activities', while reducing their visits to the scene of the burglary. Further research is needed to enable the police to assess more accurately the incidents that would benefit from a forensic visit, and, hence, be more discriminating in their requests for such visits.

Therefore, there is scope to improve the effectiveness of the way the police deal with residential burglaries by adjusting operational procedures, and diverting effort and resources away from the less effective activities towards those which offer more promise of success. It appears that detection rates can be markedly improved and the loss of property reduced, without detrimental effects on victim satisfaction. Increased detection would itself serve to improve manpower resourcing per incident, and facilitate the delivery of further improvements in victim service, and in the solution of burglary cases and other crimes.

## Notes

1. Home Office liaison and assistance was provided by Mr. B Webb and Mr. B. Brown of the Police Research Group. [\[Back to text\]](#)
2. Primary detections are original charge, further charge and caution, while secondary detections are Taken Into Consideration (TICs) and write-offs. [\[Back to text\]](#)
3. The number of secondary detections that are obtained depends on the use of TICs and prison write-offs. The number of TICs has declined over recent years due to offenders being less willing to accept crimes; in all but one sub-division prison write-offs were the main tool for obtaining secondary detections. The ratio of primary:secondary detections may alter if sub-divisions change their policy towards prison visits or offenders become less inclined to have burglaries written off. [\[Back to text\]](#)

4. Police control room logs were used to identify the burglaries that were coded for an 'immediate response'. The 'immediate response' burglaries where there were persons on or leaving the premises were identified as being reported 'in progress'. Not all the detections classified as 'caught in the act' are included in this sub-sample, mainly due to the offender being detained before the burglary was reported or as a result of a police operation. [\[Back to text\]](#)
5. It is possible that the number of burglaries where forensic evidence was found is an underestimate, because the figures were provided by detectives who may not have detailed forensic evidence in all the burglaries where it was found and tested. [\[Back to text\]](#)
6. This finding should be treated with some caution because only a small number of victims was not visited. [\[Back to text\]](#)

## References

Burrows, J. and Tarling, R. (1987) 'The Investigation of Crime in England and Wales', *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 27, pp. 229-251.

Chatterton, M. (1987) 'Assessing police effectiveness-future prospects', *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 27, pp. 80-86.

Clarke, R.V.G. (1992) *Situational Crime Prevention: Successful Case Studies*. New York: Harrow and Heston.

Forrester, D., Chatterton, M. and Pease, K. (1988) *The Kirkholt Burglary Prevention Project, Rochdale*. Crime Prevention Unit: Paper 13. London: Home Office.

Gabor, T. (1990) 'Crime Displacement and Situational Prevention: Towards the Development of Some Principles', *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, January, pp. 41-73.

Maguire, M. and Bennett, T. (1982) *Burglary in a Dwelling*. London: Heinemann.

Nee, C. and Taylor, M. (1988) 'Residential Burglary in the Republic of Ireland: A Situational Perspective', *Howard Journal*, Vol. 27, pp. 105-116.

---

## About the authors

Timothy Coupe, MA (Oxon), MSc (Aston), PhD (London), is a lecturer in Operational research at the University of Birmingham. His background is in the social sciences and his principal research interests are in performance measurement, particularly in the area of crime detection.

Max Griffiths, BSc (Manchester), MSc (Birmingham) is a Research Associate in Operational research at the University of Birmingham. His background is in statistics, and his research has been focussed on measuring police effectiveness in dealing with residential burglary.

## Copyright information

Copyright this article © Tim Coupe and Max Griffiths 1998.  
Copyright this volume © The British Society of Criminology 1998.  
Pages of the journal may be downloaded, read, and printed. No material should be altered, reposted, distributed or sold without permission. Further enquiries should be made to the British Society of Criminology.